

Glass to the Sky: The International Style of Architecture in Illinois
by Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe

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After many years of architectural work in Germany Ludwig Mies van der Rohe came to the United States in 1937. Mies dedicated his life to modern-style design. In Illinois especially, Mies is noted for his contribution to the modernist style of building design. From the Farnsworth House in Plano to the Lake Shore Drive apartments, Mies' simple but contemporary architectural philosophy is reflected throughout Illinois. Mies van der Rohe was not the first to create architecture in this pure form, but he brought its simplicity to a new level. The life and work of Mies influenced other architects, for instance, Helmut Jahn. Jahn was inspired by Mies to carry on the modernist style. Today, he heads the firm Murphy/Jahn in Chicago. Mies' idea of "less is more" became a guiding standard for these and other well-known architects in the mid-twentieth century.

Mies modern architectural principles became known as the International Style. The term International Style is the American form of Bauhaus architecture, which began in Germany. Bauhaus architecture is characterized by a basic structural design and includes no ornamentation. The buildings have flat roofs, cubic shapes, and geometrical form. The United State's International Style can be seen generally in skyscrapers and office buildings. Many of the buildings Mies designed still remain and can be seen throughout Chicago. They have a great impact on the city's skyline. Additionally, skyscrapers around the world are modeled after the ideas of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

In 1938, Mies came to Chicago to be the director of architecture at the Armour Institute of Technology, a school in the south side of the city. Mies taught his students to draw first, explore the builder's materials, and then learn the basic ideology of plan and construction. In 1940, the Armour Institute and Lewis Institute combined to become the Illinois Institute of Technology. Mies expanded the campus and designed nearly twenty different buildings, using primarily steel and concrete for the frames and curtain walls of brick and glass. The process of planning the campus took Kevin Matthews

seven years, and throughout these seven years famous, long-lasting buildings were established. A few of these buildings include Alumni Memorial Hall, the Robert F. Carr Memorial Chapel, the only religious building Mies ever constructed, and Crown Hall, which became a National Historic Landmark in August 2001.

Mies' next well-noted, yet controversial project in Illinois was the Farnsworth House in Plano. Dr. Edith Farnsworth, a friend of Mies, asked him to construct a weekend home. The Farnsworth home is rectangular in shape and made mostly of glass with a steel frame. Construction of the house began in 1946 and took six years to plan and build. It is noteworthy because it significantly demonstrates the International Style and is a contemporary expression of architecture. Some argued the excessive use of glass made the winters cold and the summers muggy and insect-infested. As a result, Dr. Farnsworth sued Mies for violation of contract because she was upset about the price of the house—\$70,000. She lost.

In 1942, Mies met Herbert Greenwald, who had the goal of creating the finest architecture. In 1948 Mies constructed the Promontory Apartments at 5530 South Shore Drive, Chicago, for Greenwald. These apartments were the first high rise design Mies built, and the first International Style residential apartment building in the United States. The Promontory Apartments was the first of many buildings to display the uncomplicated design of the International Style. Soon after, Mies designed the Algonquin Apartments, in Chicago as well, in an area called "Indian Village" because many of the buildings were named after American Indian tribes. Located at 860-880 Lakeshore Drive, Mies completed his second project for Greenwald in 1951. These twenty-six-story apartments were, once more, made of steel and glass as the core building material. Other residencies in Chicago, planned by Mies in the 1950s include the Esplanade Apartment Buildings, the Commonwealth Promenade Apartments, and 2400 Lakeview Apartments, to name a few.

Another project of Mies' was the Robert H. McCormick house, located at 299 Prospect Avenue in Elmhurst. In Chicago, Mies reconstructed a small number of Hyde Park's buildings on the University

of Chicago campus in 1956. Mies also assisted in the Chicago Federal Center on Dearborn Street, a forty-two-story office building. This project began in 1959 and was completed in 1973. Mies was the head designer and engineer, but other architects were involved with the planning and establishment of the building. Mies also designed the One Illinois Center, built in 1970 and located on East Wacker Drive. The framework was made of concrete, a variation from Mies' usual building materials. Mies' last project in Chicago and in America was the IBM building, built in 1971. The IBM building was the second largest building designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and stands at 330 North Wabash Avenue.

Mies resigned at the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1958, after twenty years as the director of architecture. He received several awards and honors for his designs in Illinois. In 1959 he was given the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal and, in 1960, was awarded the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal. President Kennedy chose Mies van der Rohe for the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963. Mies deeply valued this award because he was grateful to be chosen by the president. In the spring of 1966, he was presented the Gold Medal of the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and later in June received an honorary degree from the Illinois Institute of Technology. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe died in August 7, 1969. He was buried in Chicago's Graceland Cemetery.

Mies is recognized as one of the most prominent architects of the twentieth century. His architectural principles shaped the International Style in Illinois and provided an ideology which many architects practiced. The street in front of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art is named in honor of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. His new, modern, International Style, by the use of basic building materials such as steel and glass brought Mies fame and wide-spread reputation.

[From "Chicago Tribute: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe," <http://chicagotribute.org/Markers/Roe.htm> (Nov. 8, 2003); Elizabeth Logman, "The Mies van der Rohe society at Illinois Institute of Technology," <http://mies.iit.edu> (Nov. 7, 2003); Kevin Matthews, "Architect: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,"

http://www.greatbuildings.com/architects/Ludwig_Mies-van_der_Rohe.html (Oct. 23, 2003); “Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,” <http://www.vitruvio.ch/arc/masters/mies.htm> (Oct. 27, 2003); Mary Ann Sullivan, “Illinois Institute of Technology (originally Armour Institute),” <http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/iit/iit.html> (Nov. 7, 2003); “Modern Architecture: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,” <http://architecture.about.com/library/bl-mies.htm> (Nov. 5, 2003); Rich Lewis, “The 860-8880 Lakeshore Drive Apartments,” <http://members.aol.com/richpat/860/860d2npm.htm> (Nov. 8, 2003); Vincent Scully, Jr., *Modern Architecture*; David Spaeth, *Mies van der Rohe*.

